

Beaver restoration would reduce wildfires

By Ralph Maughan

After almost every large wildfire or fires that do significant damage to structures, people ask for proactive measures. The desire for this is rational. It needs no explanation.

Officeholders usually respond, verbally at least. Politicians' solutions, however, are often useless. One reason is lack of knowledge, but probably as often they have other agendas that can be fanned by fear of wildfire. These politicians' proposed solutions often sound plausible because they use common public ignorance to achieve credibility for what the politician is pushing. The most common plausible sounding solution used in the Western United States is large scale fuel reduction – little fuel; little fire.

A big problem with fuels reduction is that you have to pay to have it done. Potential fuel covers hundreds of millions of acres. We say "potential" fuel because what will burn varies greatly. Some years are too wet. Every year hundreds of fires burn out, but a wind, not drought could make them quickly into great conflagrations. Politicians often use the words "logging" and "fuel reduction" in the same breath, but commercial logging, where the land owner gets paid, only works for good timber. That's mostly not what is burning. Dry brush, droughty green trees, dying or dead trees, cheatgrass, and annual weeds – that's what is usually burning. It is difficult and far too expensive to eliminate these.

One idea that is rarely mentioned is to keep the stream bottoms green and raise the humidity. How could this be done? Let's restore beaver to the creeks of the Western United States. This is much less expensive than cutting out or

clearing potential fuels. It also has significant fish and wildlife benefits. We can often add flood control too, plus the recharge of aquifers.

A string of beaver ponds up a drainage is like a permanent fire break. The ponds not only enlarge the area covered with water, more importantly, they increase the portion of the creek or streamside area (the riparian zone) that stays green all summer. They raise the ground water level. Beaver ponds also increase the humidity of air in the drainage. The result is fewer hours in a day when wildfires can burn hot and hard.

Beaver reestablishment is not a sudden new idea. In fact, during the Cold War days there was fear the Soviets would burn off the West by launching thousands of incendiary devices to start range and forest fires. One plan to foil this was to have a massive effort to restore beaver ponds on as many creeks as possible. The Soviets are gone now, but the likelihood of fire has grown as the climate has mostly changed towards drier, with rising temperatures, especially as we look northward.

Additional fire related benefits of beaver are that their ponds offer remote, dispersed water storage reservoirs that could be used by firefighters during fires. Areas with beaver may serve as refuges for all animals during a fire. Finally, beaver ponds trap sediment and the debris that washes down from burns. As a result a fire's effect on water quality is reduced.

There are those who complain mightily about beaver due to changes in a creek channel, the animal's tendency to plug culverts and small bridges, and flooding from some of their ponds. Beaver sometimes cut shade and ornamental trees, trees that are unique for some reason. However, a large scale program could utilize and efficiently deploy the many methods that have devised to stop or prevent this kind of damage.

Those who trap beaver for fun and profit could have their trapping diverted to live trapping to remove beaver in problem places and redistribute them about the landscape. A wise program could outbid the often small price they get from pelts.

Some observers might point out that many creeks, ponds, and meanders in the West have not had beaver in the memory of anyone living or even any written report of the location. However, British, French and American fur trappers began trapping the beaver 300 or more years ago. Entire areas were not just heavily trapped long ago, but deliberately trapped out – trapped until none were left as part of early day conflict between European powers and the incipient American nation-state. So beaver restoration in places might be a restoration far more profound than that of wolves after an 80-100 year absence.

Beaver could be a powerful tool to tame the effects of climate change.

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